

These are serious times. They require serious leadership and serious solutions. That point is no better made than by some of our leaders in this country. As we all know, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, ADM Mike Mullen, has said in testimony before Congress that the greatest threat to America's national security is our national debt. I think that is a stunning and powerful statement about where we are and the importance of acting now. We had the former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, say not too long ago that there is a 50-percent probability that we will face a debt crisis in the next 2 to 3 years. And then, of course, we had Standard & Poors provide a negative assessment to our credit rating in this country. That, too, is something we have not seen before. I hope we are willing to take the necessary steps to avoid our credit rating being downgraded. When you get an assessment such as that, it is not too long that a downgrade in your credit rating follows.

Those are not just anecdotal things, those are fact-based assessments and analysis of where we are. These are people who know the importance of dealing with these issues. If we continue to borrow more money from other places and don't take the necessary steps to fix this, we will continue to put our future of our children and grandchildren at greater risk and in greater jeopardy.

This will not be easy. Obviously, there will be political consequences to any decisions we make. But these decisions are more difficult because we have put them off for so long. The easy decisions, the low-hanging fruit is no longer out there. We have to decide now, are we going to continue to spend and spend and borrow and borrow, to the point where we head over the cliff because we ran out of road, or will we make these decisions now and get serious about providing a stronger and better and more prosperous future for our children and grandchildren?

We cannot act as though the Federal Government doesn't have a spending problem. Those days are gone. We no longer have that luxury; the numbers bear that out. So we need to look at the debt limit and the upcoming vote as an opportunity for Republicans and Democrats to come together behind a plan that will meaningfully address our spending problem.

The status quo is not acceptable. It is going to require leadership from the President, which has been nonexistent so far. I hope he will step forward. It will require leadership from Democrats in the Senate. They control the agenda here and they have the majority. I hope we do a budget this year. We didn't do one last year in the Senate. I think it is important to have that debate, so that the American people see us debating how we are going to spend their tax dollars. That is something every American should expect and deserves from their elected leaders.

I hope we will have a budget markup where we can get these issues out in front not only for us to discuss but also in front of the American people. This is their future we are talking about. If we don't act, we are putting in great peril and jeopardy the future for our children and grandchildren.

I wanted to point out where we have come from and where, in my view, we need to go if we are going to solve this problem. I hope my colleagues will join in that discussion, not only rhetorically but that their actions will follow. We cannot just talk about this; it is time for us to quit talking and start acting.

I yield the floor and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MANCHIN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

HIGH GASOLINE PRICES

Mr. MANCHIN. Madam President, I rise to speak about an issue that is directly impacting each and every family, not just in West Virginia but throughout this whole country. It is the high gas prices. The truth is, in States all across this Nation, and particularly in West Virginia, countless families have to drive to survive. For these families, a jump in the gas price is not just an inconvenience or an annoyance, it is a threat that hits extremely hard in the pocketbook and could change their way of life.

But as every American knows, the cycle of high gas prices is not a new phenomenon with any of us. I still vividly remember waiting in line for gas in the early 1970s, when gas was rationed based on our license number—when we could buy gas. It is something I thought could never happen in America, and I am sure those whom it happened to felt the same.

This all came about because of our dependency on foreign oil. If we think back to the early 1970s, we were 28 percent dependent on foreign oil, which we thought was a high number at that time. But today we are more than 50 percent dependent on foreign oil, which has caused a massive transfer of American wealth to countries that do not like us that much and want to do us harm. We have seen this bad movie time and again. Yet somehow it seems Washington keeps thinking there is going to be a different outcome or a different ending. The right ending will only come when our Nation makes it a high priority to achieve energy independence within this generation.

While crafting such a bold plan will be difficult, I recognize—and the special interests that oppose using our own resources such as coal, natural

gas, and oil in an environmentally responsible way will resist loudly—we can no longer allow this Nation and our hard-working families to be held hostage by high gas prices. We can no longer allow partisanship and politics to undermine the common ground that can be achieved if we work together with one goal in mind—true energy independence within this generation.

Let me make it perfectly clear, high gas prices are not the only high price we are paying as a nation. For decades, our great men and women who serve us so well have been called to action in defense of our vital interests in the Middle East and all around the world. Thousands have been killed and injured. Their families have suffered the incredible pain of loss. Our nations have spent trillions in the course of these missions. Yet too many of these oil-rich countries have and will continue to use against us our dependence on their oil.

For all these reasons and for the sake of our national security, it is time for our Nation to become truly energy independent within this generation. I believe we can do it, and I know we can because just this week in beautiful Mingo County, WV, my State took a major step to confront our gas prices head on. On Monday, West Virginia said enough is enough. On a sunny morning in the town of Gilbert, WV, I helped break ground on a promising new project that could help bring down the crushing gas prices our families are confronting. There, entrepreneurs and State and local governments are participating to create hundreds of jobs at a coal-to-gasoline plant that is at the forefront of any technology in the world.

The anticipated production of this plant is very impressive. It is projected to convert 7,500 tons of West Virginia coal into 756,000 gallons of premium gasoline each and every day, which can be used to run our cars and our trucks and even some of our military equipment.

Over a 4-year construction period, it is estimated that 3,000 skilled trade workers in America will be employed. When the plant is finished, it is expected to create 300 direct jobs and hundreds of more ancillary jobs in the community.

In West Virginia and Mingo County, the government is acting as a partner—and as a good partner, not an obstacle—and that is the role our Federal Government should take toward energy independence. This is exactly the kind of project the Federal Government should work on with us to make sure it succeeds. They should be our ally, not an obstacle or an adversary. If my little State has the courage to step out and invest in our independence, then the Federal Government should also have the courage to do the same. West Virginians are sending the right message for this country. We will not let ourselves be held hostage to foreign countries that want to see the United

States be financially crippled simply because those countries have oil.

My State of West Virginia also proves we can and we must use all our domestic resources to break our cycle of dependence on foreign oil within this generation. It doesn't matter whether your State has oil, coal, natural gas, geothermal, nuclear, biomass, wind, solar or hydro because we have to harness all the tremendous resources right here in America or we are going to continue to rely on countries that have contributed directly or indirectly to changing America for the worse.

At the end of the day, it is going to take everything we can do and every resource we have to become truly independent. That is one of the many reasons why I am cosponsoring the American Alternative Fuels Act with my colleague, JOHN BARRASSO, from Wyoming. Among other things, the bill would break down barriers to alternative energy fuels, including those from coal, biomass, algae, and waste.

There are other smart, targeted actions we can take in the short term to help reduce the price of gas for our families. I have signed on to an important piece of bipartisan legislation sponsored by my friend, Senator HERB KOHL, from Wisconsin. It is the No Oil Producing & Exporting Cartels Act, better known as NOPEC. This bill would finally allow the Department of Justice to go after foreign countries, such as the members of OPEC, because of their price-fixing behavior.

The other major issue we must address now is speculators and oil company subsidies. This is not a supply issue. The real problem is pure greed—some who are taking advantage of the instability in our world to line their pockets on the backs of American families—or a tax policy that does not make any sense at all, that continues to subsidize oil companies when the price of a barrel of oil is at the highest it has ever been and the profits are at a record high. This doesn't make any sense to American families.

Wouldn't it make more sense that these subsidies they now have should only be available when the cost of production exceeds the price of a barrel of oil? That would be a commonsense solution. It would ensure stability and steady production, and it does not force taxpayers to fill the bank accounts of major oil companies when they are already making record profits.

Because we must do so much more to protect American families, I have also encouraged the Commodity Futures Trading Commission to take aggressive steps in the short term to regulate and pursue the oil speculators who are driving the price of a gallon of gas through the ceiling.

While the most important thing our country can do is establish a national energy plan for independence, all of those actions are steps we can take to make sure we relieve the financial pressures on our families and help secure our country.

For all of the wonderful families of West Virginia, for the great people of the United States of America, and all of our children and grandchildren, this country must finally answer the call. It is time. It is truly time. It is time to free this Nation, put politics aside, and work together to make energy independence a national priority.

I truly believe that if we work together as Americans and focus on a commonsense approach, we can develop a strong bipartisan energy plan that will not only break the power of foreign oil countries and speculators, but use the resources that we have right here in America. We can chart a new and promising energy future for this great Nation and we must start today. I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Illinois.

Mr. DURBIN. I want to thank the Senator from West Virginia for his comments on our dependence on foreign oil. We import about \$1 billion worth of oil a day. That does not make our Nation any stronger. In fact, it makes us more dependent. For our economy to grow, we need to have good homegrown energy sources. We may never be totally independent, but if we do not move toward independence, then I am afraid we are going to continue to be victimized, as we have been recently, by not only oil companies but the greed the Senator mentioned that drives up gasoline prices every Spring. Just as sure as the baseball season is going to open, gasoline prices are going to go sky high. Then they are going to retreat, but they never retreat to where they started. They always end up higher as we go into the summer vacation season. The Senator from West Virginia has some thoughtful ideas here on how to address this. I share his support of HERB KOHL's legislation that deals with NOPEC, the OPEC cartel, and the fact that we have been victimized by them for way too long.

Like the Senator's State, we have a lot of coal in Illinois. We want to find an environmentally responsible way to use it, to take all of the energy out of the ground and put it to work for America so Americans can go to work. I thank the Senator for his leadership on this important topic.

ILLINOIS FLOODING

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, closer to home in Illinois, we are fighting the floods. It happens regularly, and we have had a tough time with it. The Ohio River, the Illinois River, and the Mississippi River have all been threatening communities such as Metropolis and Old Shawneetown. I was down in Cairo, IL, a couple of weeks ago and saw how bad it was. It was a scary situation in a very poor town.

The Corps of Engineers had a tough decision to make. They had to blow a levee, which means opening farm land to be flooded. To take the pressure off the rivers, they did it. I said to General

Walsh when he was in the process of making the decision: Do what is right and I will stand by you. I know what I want you to do, but do what is right. I think he did the right thing, and I stand by him.

Now I stand by those living in Missouri who were affected by that decision. If they in any way suffered hardship or inconvenience or loss of income as farmers, we need to stand by them, as we do with so many across America in times of disaster.

I know we have had a big challenge in our State. Governor Quinn and I were on the phone the day before yesterday talking about the response. He was on his way down to Metropolis. A mutual friend of ours, Mayor Billy McDaniel, down there is working with Pulaski County Board Chairman Monte Russell to find places for people to stay as they wait for the flood waters to recede in Metropolis.

In Carmi, Mayor David Port and Golconda Mayor Bill Altman are working with our office to make sure that pumps and other supplies are there when they are needed. In Cairo, we had a change in administration. I worked with Judson Childs, the former mayor. He has now been replaced by Tyrone Coleman. We will continue to work with them. They vacated a lot of homes. People are staying in gyms and other places and waiting for a chance to go back home. We are going to do our best to make sure that happens.

A special salute to our Illinois National Guard. These men and women come to the rescue of our State every time we face a disaster. This is no different. They are putting in long hours. I thank them for their unselfish commitment. And GEN Bill Enyart can be proud of the men and women of the Guard units across the State of Illinois.

The Illinois Emergency Management Agency under Director Jonathon Luck has been in touch with our office every single day. They are assessing the damage that has been done. They will measure that damage, and at the appropriate moment—and I am sure it will be soon—will move forward with our congressional delegation to ask for Federal disaster status and Federal disaster assistance. That is something that I think will definitely be needed and is appropriate for the magnitude of this challenge.

I will work with my colleague Senator KIRK, who visited last week in this region. We are going to work together, in a bipartisan way, to make sure that our State and the people who are suffering under these flooding conditions have a chance to recover, get back to their homes and back to their businesses and back to work.

(The remarks of Mr. DURBIN pertaining to the introduction of S. 952 are printed in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Rhode Island.